

Make Way for Mute Swans

By LAUREN GRILLI

There's a new couple in town, and they seem to be attracting visitors and producing some excitement. Though they appreciate neighborly visits and welcome gifts, don't try to give these two a batch of cookies, a banana chocolate chip cake, or even a healthy fruit basket. Bread crusts are fine. Just throw them on the ground.

The new Duxbury residents, a male and female Mute swan, have taken up

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Duxbury's swans keep a close eye on their Rt. 14 pond.

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their waterfront residence in a small pond off of Route 14 near Chandler Street and have attracted many passing motorists.

While local bird expert Fahy Bygate says swans have been nesting in the pond for years, it seems that previous occupants have had a run of bad luck.

Over the past two years, three swans have been run over on Route 14, prompting Helen Fowler of South River Run Way to request the construction of a fence between the pond and the roadway.

She said that two years ago one male swan was killed, leaving the female to raise nine babies – an unusually large family for one swan – on her own. Last year, two swans were killed by cars because they wandered into the street while trying to protect their young.

"As far as I'm concerned, the road is in their way," said Fowler.

This year, the rough spring weather made it difficult for the swans' eggs to hatch. "It was a terrible spring to keep young alive," said Duxbury's Conservation Agent Joe Grady. "That rainy week made it hard to keep the eggs warm and dry. If there are no eggs in the nest, and no babies around, then breeding has probably been a failure."

Fowler, who has been watching the swans since their arrival, said she noticed that the female sat on the nest for two weeks longer than normal. She saw only one surviving cygnet, but said she believes that it probably died during the rainy week.

Most birds also have predators that go after eggs or babies, according to Bygate, who writes the *Duxbury Field Notes* column for the Clipper. "Snapping turtles have been known to go after baby swans," she said.

Grady also said that over the years, swans have become accustomed to having people around. More important, they have grown accustomed to being fed from the hands of passersby.

"Swans certainly are not an endangered species – if anything, swans are invasive," said Grady. "But people enjoy the sight of them."

The swans look like beauties but can behave like beasts, said Bygate.

"They tear the vegetation from the bottom of the pond, which ruins it," she said.



The male swan is on the left, closest to the camera. He has a slightly bigger bump on his nose than the female.

"So they can be a nuisance."

It is only during breeding season, a period of five or six weeks in early spring, that male swans become aggressive and territorial, said David Clapp of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. He recommends never antagonizing the

swans during this time.

"Swans are usually calm," said Clapp. "But, you can get a grumpy one."

The Mute swan, which is the type of swan that is nesting in Duxbury, is not native to America. The Mute swan comes from Europe, and in Victorian times was used to ornament the castle gardens, according to Clapp.

"During the mid-19th century, wealthy men and women brought the Mute swans to areas in Long Island, Boston, and New Hampshire for the same decorative purposes," he said.

Over the years, keeping birds inside the castle grounds became more and more difficult, and the swans adapted to nature.

Duxbury's swans should remain in their new waterfront home throughout the coming summer months. Perhaps by September they will welcome a new batch of babies.